



BY ARLO BATES AND ELEANOR PUTNAM.

OF all the things which made her poor little life miserable, and there were plenty of them, Tilly Ann disliked worst—excepting Miss Pinchimp, of course; always excepting Miss Pinchimp—the india-rubber tree. The india-rubber tree was Miss Pinchimp's dearest treasure, which perhaps was reason enough why Tilly Ann should not be fond of it; and so great was Miss Pinchimp's pride in the plant that she was constantly having its leaves washed. Whenever Tilly Ann was not washing dishes, or picking up chips in the back yard, or weeding in the garden, or sewing together the edges of an old sheet that had been ripped down the middle to bring the worn part to the edges, or doing some other chore of a like nature, she was set to wash the leaves of the india-rubber tree.

The india-rubber tree was five feet tall, to begin with, aside from the tub in which it grew, and to give it a more imposing appearance this tub was mounted upon a stool, so that when the plant was to have its bath Tilly Ann was obliged to begin operations by bringing in a wooden chair from the kitchen, on which to stand while she cleaned the great shiny leaves. Then she would wash away with patient care every stray speck of dust, for well did she know how narrowly Miss Pinchimp would examine to see whether the work were done thoroughly.

And Tilly Ann's chief treasure was a large clasp-pin. It was a little bent, and the silver wash was almost entirely worn away, but it was absolutely necessary for the kilting up of the childish petticoats of Tilly Ann when she indulged in those gymnastics which were her only recreation, and which commanded the wondering admiration of all the village children, on those rare occasions when the strange little maid could escape from the eyes

of her mistress and give an impromptu exhibition of her talents.

For Tilly Ann was, by birth, a little acrobat. Her parents had been professionals who had come to Topton with a circus, and been unable to go on because the mother was ill unto death. The father and little Tilly Ann, a thin, half-starved morsel of five, had watched beside the death-bed, and then, just as they turned from the grave of the wife and mother to go forward to the town where the circus was exhibiting, the father fell down in a fit, and in two days more Tilly Ann was doubly orphaned.

The poor little mite was prematurely old, and of a certain uncanny wisdom in many matters. She had lived all her life in the atmosphere of the circus, and in many of the acrobatic tricks which her father and mother performed she had learned to take a part. It was often little more than being thrown from one to the other in a way which really was not at all dangerous, but which looked so; or than standing on the head of one or the other of them. But already Tilly Ann had figured in the bills as Mlle. Petite; and she was not without a pretty clear idea of what that meant, too. After her father's death, she had but one thought, and that was to get back to the circus again. There people had been kind to her, her father and mother had praised her, and the applause of the public had already touched her little head with its dangerous delight.

When she was sent first to the poor-farm, and then to the far less kindly dwelling of Miss Pinchimp, Tilly Ann's stout little heart was very nearly broken; and when, after three separate attempts to run away, she had been captured and brought back, the child must have fallen into utter despair had it not been for the secretly cherished hope that some day the same old circus would appear in Topton and take her away from all this hateful life. To this hope she clung, and meanwhile she improved every possible opportunity to

practice the gymnastics she had been taught, or which she remembered having seen her father and others do. The fence of the back yard was high, and a convenient row of tall lilacs cut off the view from the back windows, and on the turf of the back yard did Tilly Ann, her scant petticoats kilted up with the invaluable safety-pin, turn and tumble in a way that would have made Miss Pinchimp rigid with horror had she witnessed the spectacle.

For Miss Eliza Pinchimp was nothing if not proper. She was a large body, and might therefore have been expected to be good natured, whereas the truth seemed to be that there was only so much the more of her to be disagreeable. A big bowl of milk makes much more bonny-clabber than a wee pitcher full, and it may have been on this principle that Miss Pinchimp was the most completely cross and unpleasant person in the whole village.

One July morning Tilly Ann was, as usual, washing the india-rubber tree, but anybody who looked at her could see that her whole small person was fairly quivering with excitement. She craned her neck toward the window through which from afar came the sound of a band and a confused buzz as of the distant voices of small boys, all of which announced that the circus was coming to Topton. At any time this would have filled the soul of Tilly Ann with wildest emotion, but to-day she had especial cause for excitement. On one of the big, flaming posters with which the whole neighborhood had been decorated for a fortnight, Tilly Ann had seen a name she knew. It was Signor Bernassio, advertised as "the world renowned and unparalleled juggler and knife-thrower," and Tilly Ann remembered Signor Bernassio perfectly. His real name was Tim Bernaise, and he had been a warm friend of the father and mother of the poor little waif stranded in unfriendly Topton, and doomed to the continual washing of the leaves of Miss Pinchimp's india-rubber tree.

From the moment she saw this name, the mind of Tilly Ann had been in a ferment. She felt, with a quivering excitement, that the time for escape had come at last. How she was to get away she had no idea, but get away she must; and this morning, while she scrubbed away at the big leaves with unconscious vigor, her shrewd little head was full of wild plans that became more and more impossible as the sound of the far-off band increased her excitement. How the old days came back to Tilly Ann as she stood there, and how delightful did the past seem in contrast with the present. She leaned so far forward in her excitement, that at last the wooden chair on which she stood gave a sudden lurch, and Tilly Ann saved herself from a bad tumble only by jumping nimbly to the floor.

She saved herself and she even kept almost all the water in the basin from spilling; but, alas and alack! one of the stiff, shiny leaves of the india-rubber tree was broken short off in the middle. Tilly Ann stared at the broken leaf, with her mouth open and a dreadful feeling that the only hope for her must now be that the earth would open and swallow her. She knew Miss Pinchimp's affection for the plant, and she knew but too well Miss Pinchimp's temper and the weight of Miss Pinchimp's hand. Necessity and abuse had sharpened her shrewd little wits, and with the awful vision of one of her mistress's floggings before her eyes, Tilly Ann's small but keen brain was not long in devising a means of escaping at least present detection. With a long pin stuck through the rib of the leaf, she very cleverly fastened the broken piece in its place, and then turned the tub around so that the mended part of the plant came against the folds of the lace window-curtain.

Tilly Ann had scarcely accomplished this ingenious deception when she heard the approaching steps of Miss Pinchimp, and while her guilty little heart trembled with fear, that lady's big person appeared in the doorway.

"Well," Miss Pinchimp said, in a voice that showed that her temper, never very sweet, was unusually acid that morning, "I hope you have been long enough about washing the india-rubber tree."

"It is all done now, ma'am," Tilly Ann answered tremblingly.

Miss Pinchimp sailed across the room and examined the plant critically.

"You've made all the leaves streaked," she said. "What have you turned it round for? You —"

The words died on her lip. Her mistress had moved the india-rubber tree half-way about, when the mended leaf caught in the lace curtain and the broken portion turned, as on a pivot, on the pin with which it was fastened. Tilly Ann waited to see no more. She dashed out of the room and fled to her usual refuge, the roof of the shed, while Miss Pinchimp, fat and scant of breath, vainly tried to catch her before she could attain to that safe, but rather dangerous, elevation.

The roof of the shed was Tilly Ann's City of Refuge. Here she could look down in scornful triumph upon her enemy, who sometimes skirmished about with a long bean-pole, vainly endeavoring, as Tilly Ann expressed it, "to whack the legs off of me," but who had learned from experience that, on the whole, the wisest plan was to wait until the fugitive came down, and then to pounce upon her.

For the unfortunate part of it was, that Tilly

Ann had to come down. She often wished, with all the passionate despair of eight years, that she were a bird, that she might take flight from the roof into the homeless freedom of the air, and she even had seasons of thinking that she would find consolation in being one of the cats who went so lightly from roof to roof and defied all attempts at capture. The race of Miss Pinchimp and Tilly Ann was not a dignified one, but it was funny, had there been anybody to see the droll side of it. Miss Pinchimp, however, was too angry and Tilly

was perched, and then she turned toward Miss Eliza, who, seated on an inverted tub in the yard below, was recovering her breath.

"And enough sight better off would I 'a' been in the poor-house," said Tilly Ann, boldly, "than I've ever been with you! You've beat me and starved me, and never done nothin' decent for me; and now I've stood it just as long as I could, and I'm goin' off."

"Going off!" echoed Miss Pinchimp, completely taken aback by the boldness of this address



"THE ROOF OF THE SHED WAS TILLY ANN'S CITY OF REFUGE."

Ann too frightened to look upon it lightly. The child scrambled up over the hen-house like a squirrel and gained the temporary safety of the woodshed roof, while her mistress, hot and breathless, stood below and shook her fist wrathfully.

"I'll settle with you, when you come down from there," panted Miss Pinchimp. "This is what I get for saving you from the poor-house and being kind to you, you lazy circus imp!"

Now, in all the unhappy years poor Tilly Ann had lived with Miss Pinchimp she had never been impudent; she had received in silence whatever her mistress had chosen to say; but this taunt at her origin was too much even for her patience. She looked over to the gay flags fluttering from the tents, in full sight from the roof where she

"Oh, you think you're going back to the circus, do you? I knew you'd be up to that sooner or later. You just try it, and I'll send Cy Cates after you; and he's a constable, I'd have you to know."

Secretly, Tilly Ann was decidedly impressed by this threat, but the safety of the shed roof and the absence of any sign of the appearance of Cy Cates gave her courage to hide her fear.

"Oh, I ain't scared," she called down.

Then, from sheer recklessness and the excitement of having at last defied her mistress, she began to sing shrilly a saucy rhyme that the village children, who bore Miss Pinchimp no good will, were in the habit of singing for the benefit of Tilly Ann.

It would be hard to find any excuse for poor Tilly Ann, as she sat on the roof of the shed fling-

ing this wretched doggerel down at Miss Pinchimp, except that she had had little opportunity to learn any better. By a strange chance, the one person in all Topton who had tried to teach the child what was right and who had been kind to her, appeared on the scene at this moment. It was Miss Rose May, Tilly Ann's Sunday-school teacher, who, finding the house door open and nobody in sight, had walked in after the friendly fashion of country folk, and who had been led by the sound of Tilly Ann's shrill singing to the back door, which opened into the yard where sat Miss Pinchimp on the inverted tub, red with wrath and her exertions in the race.

Tilly Ann almost fell off the roof when she saw Miss Rose, but her attention was quickly diverted. Miss Pinchimp attempted to start up from her seat, when suddenly the bottom of the tub on which she was sitting gave way, and with a crash and a scream she fell back into the middle of the hoops and staves, where she was imprisoned helplessly. The child on the roof sent up a shriek of laughter, while Miss Rose ran forward to help the struggling prisoner.

"Tilly Ann," Miss Rose said, "stop laughing! — and come and help me."

"I dars n't," Tilly Ann answered. "She'll beat me if she catches hold o' me."

"No, she won't," Miss Rose returned. "I'll see to that. Come here quickly."

Tilly Ann scrambled down from her lofty perch, and came to the assistance of her teacher; but so firmly was Miss Pinchimp imprisoned in the tub that they had to break the hoops before she could be released. She glared at Tilly Ann with a look that meant, "Wait till I get you alone!" but she said not a word, marching in silence into the house.

Rose lingered a moment.

"Oh, Tilly Ann!" she said sorrowfully, "how could you do so?"

"She was going to lick me," Tilly Ann answered, defensively. "She's always beatin' me and I ain't goin' to stand it no longer."

Rose sighed, but she evidently thought that it was of no use to say more at this moment; so she turned and followed Miss Pinchimp into the house, there to be entertained with a lively account of the child's wickedness and unmanageableness.

Left to herself, Tilly Ann's first feeling was one of sorrow and shame that her teacher had seen her naughtiness; then she burst into a laugh at the remembrance of Miss Pinchimp's struggle in the tub; then, with a sudden light, it flashed upon her that here was her chance of escape. Her mistress was engaged with Miss May, and here was the tent of Signor Bernassio hardly a stone's throw

away. She struck her worn little hands together, and then ran swiftly up to the attic where she slept. She had a few relics of her father and mother, which she had kept hidden ever since she came into Miss Pinchimp's power, and with these done up in a small bundle, she was soon speeding over the fields to the circus tents. Signor Bernassio was just finishing the unpacking of his belongings and getting them ready for the afternoon's performance when the canvas of his tent was lifted, and a child's head appeared between the ground and the cloth. The shoulders followed, and then the hands and arms. Having wriggled herself in thus far, Tilly Ann paused and looked at him.

"Hullo!" said the sword-throws, "who are you?"

"I'm Tilly Ann, 'Nimble Dick's' little girl — 'Mlle. Petite.'"

The sword-throws stared at her in amazement. Then he took her by the shoulders and dragged her into the tent.

"Where in the world did you come from? Where is your father?" he asked.

"Dead," Tilly Ann answered, tears of grief and excitement springing to her eyes, "and Mother's dead, and I wish I was dead, too."

Signor Bernassio examined her with curious eyes.

"Well," he said at length, "you don't look as if you'd been where they lived very high. Sit down here and tell me about things."

And so Tilly Ann told him her whole story from beginning to end. He laughed boisterously at her account of the events of the morning, but he said some extremely sharp words under his breath at other parts of the story. In his way the knife-throws had been very fond of Nimble Dick, and he was ready enough to do a good turn to Nimble Dick's daughter, especially as it happened to suit his own convenience just then.

"Well, Tilly Ann," he said, when her story was told, "you're all right now. I'll take care of you!"

"Oh, thank you," she cried joyfully. "I'll do anything you want, and work for you all the time, if I need n't go back."

"Now, look here, little one," the knife-throws went on, after a little more talk in which Tilly Ann had declared her intention of joining the circus once more, and taking up again her old life in the sawdust ring, "if you've got the pluck there's no reason why you should n't begin to-day. The girl that performs with me is sick, and I must have somebody to take her place. Do you think you'd have the grit to stand still and let me throw knives at you?"

"Oh, yes!" Tilly Ann cried, joyfully. "I've

seen you do it lots of times, and I know that you would n't hurt anybody for the world."

"That's so," the Signor returned, approvingly. "You're your father's own girl; and I would n't hurt Nimble Dick's girl, least of all."

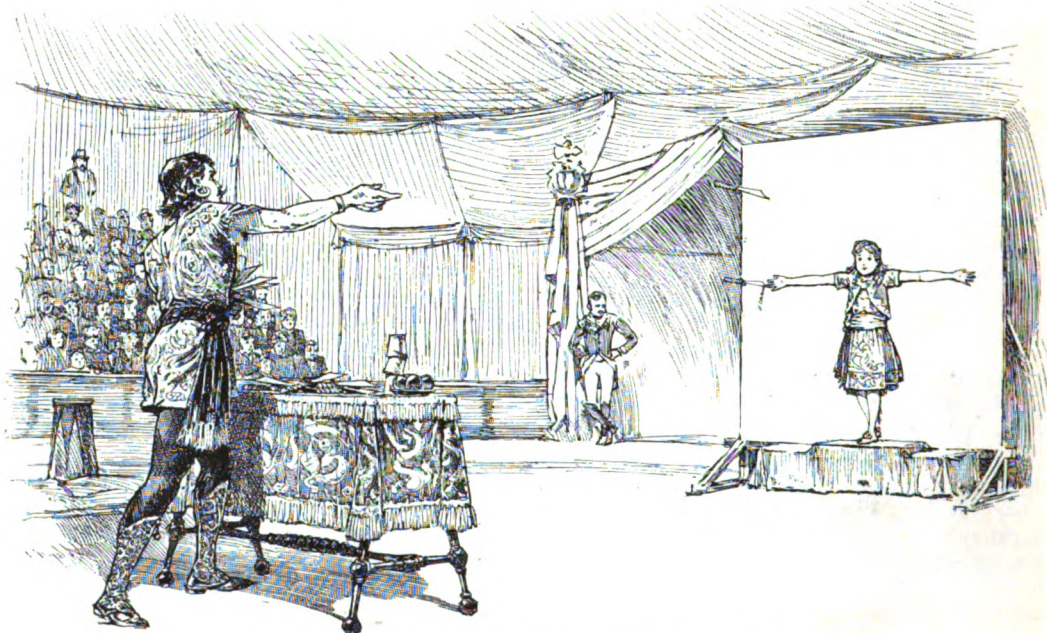
"Oh, I'll do it," Tilly Ann went on, clasping her hands in delight. "Shall I have a velvet dress with spangles on it?"

"You shall that," was the hearty response; "but mind, you need n't do it if you don't want to, and it's no use trying it if you'd be scared and can't keep as still as a graven image."

softly as he placed her with her back against the board into which the knives were to be thrown. "Now hold hard. I know my business, and you are as safe as if you were in your own bed."

Tilly Ann answered him with a happy and fearless smile. The excitement of it all, the joy of having escaped from Miss Pinchimp, and the gladness at getting back to the life of which she had dreamed and of which she had never seen the hard and cruel side, filled her with delight too great for words.

Swish! went the first knife from the careful and skillful hands of Signor Bernassio. It stuck



"TILLY ANN STOOD AS MOTIONLESS AS IF SHE HAD BEEN CARVED IN WOOD."

But Tilly Ann was not frightened and she was sure she could keep still. The dress of the sick girl was tried, and with a very little changing fitted Tilly Ann as if it had been made for her. They had a little rehearsal beforehand, at which Signor Bernassio assured Tilly Ann she behaved like a real trump; and that very afternoon, before the eyes of all Tipton, Tilly Ann danced into the ring in all the glory of a pink dress, a jacket of cheap red velvet, much bespangled, and a proud consciousness of her position in which the greatest actress had never excelled her.

At first she had only to hand Signor Bernassio the things he needed, and with the help of careful instructions beforehand, a hint now and then from the juggler, and her natural quickness she went through without a single mistake.

"Well done, little chicken," the Signor said

quivering into the board just at the end of one of Tilly Ann's fingers. She smiled at the thrower to show him that she did not mind, and stood as motionless as if she had been carved in wood. Swish! Swish! went two more in quick succession, and the thrower nodded to show that he felt sure she would do her part perfectly. Swish! Swish! the knives flashed toward her in a perfect shower, until they stood between her fingers, marked the width of her little thin body, and hedged her all about with their bright blades. Swish! Swish! until only her head and neck were free, and still Tilly Ann's eyes were as bright and fearless as ever, and not a nerve of her plucky little self knew a single quiver of fear.

"Steady!" she heard the Signor say under his breath, and then with a "Swish!" that seemed a hundred times louder than all the rest, a knife

landed so near her ear that, as it quivered, she felt the touch of its cold steel. She pressed her lips together, but she did not waver, and before she had time to think she felt the jar of the knife which struck the board beside her other ear.

Thus far she had kept her eyes fixed on Signor Bernassio, but now by some unaccountable and unhappy impulse she was moved to glance away from him. Perhaps it was that the knives in their flight toward her head now seemed as if they were coming straight into her face. Just across the ring, not sitting in the seats like the others, but standing by the rope, she saw the town constable, Cy Cates. The threat of Miss Pinchimp, to send the constable after her if she ran away, rushed upon poor Tilly Ann. She forgot the knives, forgot everything but a desire to hide, and she turned her head.

Swish! She heard the knife coming as she started, and with a horrible shock of despair she realized all. But she shut her eyes quickly and with an effort of the will, wonderful in a mere child, she held herself still. She felt a stinging scratch on her forehead and the spurt of warm blood. A cry went up from the people, and Signor Bernassio sprang forward.

"He has killed her!" somebody shouted; and the men started up from their seats.

Then it was that the real greatness of the forlorn little waif showed itself, and that for a moment Tilly Ann was heroic. She forgot herself, forgot her fright, her wound, and thought only that Signor Bernassio would be blamed for her fault. Like a flash, a sense of having brought harm to her father's old friend who was kind to her came into her mind.

"I'm not hurt," she cried out at the top of her voice. "It was my own fault. Throw the rest, please. I won't go back to Miss Pinchimp's."

The shrill tones, heightened by her anxiety to make everybody hear, rang through the tent above the growing noise. There was a hushed instant in which people took in the meaning of what she said, and then a roar of applause went up such as never before nor since shook a circus-tent in Tipton. Signor Bernassio, with tears in his eyes, was hastily pulling out the knives that surrounded her, and then and there, before them all, he bent over and kissed her.

"You are a trump," he said, in a voice somehow strange and hoarse. "You are your father's own child."

And once more the applause was so deafening that for the first time in her life Tilly Ann blushed hotly, although she could not for her life have told why she did so.

Of course there was no more knife-throwing that afternoon; but before nightfall everybody in

Tipton, even to Miss Pinchimp herself, had heard the whole story. Tilly Ann became a heroine in an hour, and before it was time for the evening performance to begin, a pretty little basket-phaeton came driving down into the field where the circustents were pitched, and there was Rose May to see Tilly Ann.

Tilly Ann came across the dimly-lighted tent to meet her with the feeling that it was a great while since she had seen Rose that morning. She was silent while Rose took her by the hands and kissed her, and then, as Miss May softly laid the tip of her gloved finger on the strip of plaster that covered the hurt on her forehead, Tilly Ann, overcome by the excitement of the day and by this tenderness, broke into a sob which, with a strong effort, she strangled in its birth.

"I won't go back to Miss Pinchimp," she said.

"No," Rose said. "But will you go back to me?"

For Rose had had a conversation with her father, and then she had stopped on her way to the circus to speak a moment with Miss Pinchimp, whom she had found fairly quivering with rage and excitement.

"Think what an awful thing for a child to do," Miss Pinchimp had said, "to stand there, in that shameless way, to have knives thrown at her! And to call out my name in a circus tent, after all I have done for her. She shall never darken my doors again!"

"Very well, then, Miss Pinchimp," Miss May had answered, "of course you have no objection to my taking her home."

"Goodness, no!" the other had retorted. "If you will have the abandoned little wretch you are welcome to her."

At first, even the prospect of living with Miss Rose was hardly sufficient to make Tilly Ann willing to give up her cherished plan of going with the circus; but when Signor Bernassio added his voice, she was in the end persuaded.

"It's much the best, little one," he said, "though it ain't often I see a girl so plucky as you, and you'd make your way; but with all I've seen of the life, it would n't be doing the square thing by Nimble Dick, if I was to tell his girl anything but to keep out of it. You ain't seen the rough side of it, but you would soon enough; and I tell you to stay with the lady, much as I hate to give you up."

And so at last Tilly Ann yielded, and from that day she began a new life, happy and well cared for;—although to the end of her life Miss Pinchimp, whenever she can find anybody to listen, will delight in painting in blackest colors what she always speaks of as "the awful thing that Tilly Ann did."